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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ISLAMABAD 015736

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [AEMR](#) [ASEC](#) [EAID](#) [MASS](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PK](#)

SUBJECT: PAKISTAN EARTHQUAKE: PUBLIC REACTION TOUR D'HORIZON

REF: ISLAMABAD 15463

Classified By: Derived from DSCG 05-01, b and d

1. (SBU) Summary: Public criticism of the Government of Pakistan's (GOP) relief operations continues. Media images of angry survivors still waiting for adequate relief, coupled with often-inaccurate and inflammatory editorials are fueling this resentment. Opposition parties have seized on this criticism to demand a full debate in the National Assembly in an effort to discredit the GOP. Private individuals, companies, political parties and non-governmental organizations have initiated charitable drives, establishing collection points nationwide. Some of these efforts are being channeled into GOP relief operations, while in other cases direct delivery to victims is being undertaken. Efforts by radical clerics to argue against acceptance of relief supplies from non-Muslim countries has failed, and public opinion seems very much in favor of taking aid from any donor, including Israel and India. End Summary.

Islamabad/Rawalpindi

2. (SBU) With numerous Kashmiri families living and working in Islamabad, nearly everyone knows someone affected by this natural disaster. Collection and donation points have been established by government entities, private businesses, political parties, and NGOs. Banners and advertisements exhort residents to contribute generously, and many are doing so. Prominent politicians and businessmen have used the opportunity to publicize their generosity. Many of the donations collected are funneled to GOP-relief efforts, although in some cases private individuals, charities, and political parties are attempting to transport donations by road to Azad Jammu Kashmir (AJK) with decidedly mixed results. Public criticism of the government-relief efforts remain vocal and widespread. Anger remains over the collapse of the Margalla Tower apartments, the substandard construction of which appears to be the result of local government corruption. Media continues to criticize the speed and coordination of the GOP's response; there are daily stories from areas that have yet to receive sufficient help. Opposition parties are attacking the GOP relief effort. A National Assembly open debate on October 14 degenerated into a shouting match with opposition politicians denouncing the GOP as incompetent. The opposition has requested a full parliamentary debate on relief efforts. Foreign donor aid has been uniformly welcomed and the magnitude of the response (which is visibly apparent at the international airport) has won praise from even normally critical audiences. Indeed, initial Islamist objections to aid from non-Muslim countries, particularly Israel and India, were quickly silenced as public opinion seemed firmly in the other direction.

Kashmir and NWFP

4. (SBU) Post has reports from Pakistan-controlled Azad Kashmir (AJK) that the GOP response has not been well-received. Unrealistically high expectations of the army's ability to deliver relief supplies coupled with severe logistical challenges and deteriorating weather conditions have created a well-spring of resentment. Reports of attacks on aid convoys and distribution centers by villagers continue to filter back from the area, indicating a continuing sense of desperation. While the GOP's growing focus on reconstruction may overcome this initial anger, for the moment AJK appears to feel largely neglected by the center. This perception endures despite international relief worker assessments that relief efforts (both GOP and private) are being distributed equitably among the affected areas based on need and accessibility.

5. (SBU) In the North West Frontier Province (NWFP), business remains entirely focused on earthquake relief. Charity drives are on the upswing, as people grasp the enormity of the damage to northeastern districts that now face a very difficult winter. The relief effort continues to be hampered by a lack of overarching authority. The Islamist Muttahida Majlis-i-Amal (MMA) government has been on the move throughout the hardest hit areas to coordinate the relief efforts with federal and Army units. Within the MMA, officials are sniping at each other over the first-time attendance of Chief Minister Durrani at the October 12 National Security Council meeting. JI officials are saying

"once, but never again," while JUI-F leaders argue such attendance is necessary to mount a more effective relief response. In the Provincial Assembly, parties passed a unanimous resolution on October 17, calling for a specific earmark of international relief funds for NWFP. This reflects a deeply-rooted distrust in national decision-making that the assembly feels will short change the province. The English-language provincial press remains critical of the Army for an insufficient initial response, its refusal of Indian helicopter support, and its failure to divert more defense resources to the crisis. The Urdu-language provincial press has, in contrast, been uniformly complimentary of army efforts in the province.

Punjab

16. (SBU) In Punjab, provincial and local efforts to collect and funnel relief efforts north are prominent and ongoing. While opposition parties remained relatively quiet during the first week following the earthquake, they have now begun to break their silence. Opposition members explained that they had refrained from criticizing the government relief efforts in order to present a unified front, as well as to avoid the appearance of taking political advantage of the crisis. The initial grace period has now come to an end and they will raise their complaints at the October 20 provincial assembly session. Both opposition politicians and PML members have begun to criticize the lack of information and transparency in the collection and distribution of relief goods and donations. They additionally criticized a perceived lack of concern from both federal and provincial leaders. The continued absence of the Chief Minister is cited as the prime example. Instead of being in the affected areas with the people, the leadership remains in Islamabad or, in the case of the Chief Minister, hosting fundraisers in Washington, DC. One PML member noted that although Nawaz Sharif had major faults, during the flood in Punjab he was seen distributing goods to the victims. She stated "This is not a people's government and it comes across at a time like this."

Karachi

17. (SBU) Karachi is taken with the call to help fellow Pakistanis in the earthquake zone. Collection sites for relief goods have sprung up at schools, on military bases, near mosques and bus stations. Karachi university students and others have lined up to give blood and appeals for monetary donations are plastered on bill boards and the sides of buildings. Large amounts of money have reached NGO's such as the well respected Edhi Foundation. Pakistan Navy Karachi Commander Vice Admiral Muhammad Asad Qureshi stated that each of Pakistan's armed services stationed in Karachi have "adopted" a zone in the earthquake effected area and plan to focus their individual attention in those particular areas. (Note: It is unclear if this is an organized effort. End note.) All major local press was dock-side for the October 18 arrival of the USS Pearl Harbor and off-loading of its humanitarian relief cargo, providing favorable coverage of this USG assistance. In courtesy calls with the Pakistan Navy's District Commander, the Fleet Commander and the Karachi Port Trust, Pakistani hosts thanked the United States for assisting relief operations, saying that they would facilitate future port calls to the maximum extent possible. This warmth seems to be shared by many here in Karachi. In full dress whites, our visiting US Navy officials received waves and smiles as they passed in a Pakistan Navy motorcade from call to call. At one traffic intersection a group of covered women leaned out of the back of a taxi-bus to smile and wave. Pakistani men on the side of the road nodded their heads in agreement.

Balochistan

18. (SBU) In contrast to other parts of the country, sources in Balochistan report that business continues as usual in much of the province. Collection points appear active only in Quetta and Pashtun areas in the north. Baloch-audience papers reportedly returned to their normal news coverage at the end of last week. According to one Baloch tribal leader, most Baloch view AJK and NWFP as totally outside their area of interest. While tribal loyalty among Pashtuns compel sympathy with their NWFP compatriots, there is no prevailing sense of national tragedy in Baloch areas. If anything, a certain amount of resentment prevails that a similarly massive national and international relief operation did not materialize when massive floods devastated parts of Balochistan earlier in the year.

19. (C) Comment: One-week after the earthquake, resentment over what the public views as slow and uncoordinated GOP relief operations continues to build. President Musharraf remains above-the-fray, leaving the military and the Federal Relief Commission in the Prime Minister's Office (the designated execution coordination points for relief efforts)

to bear the brunt of the criticism. While the opposition hopes to use public anger over the GOP response to discredit the President, neither the childish name-calling at the October 14 National Assembly debate or its refusal to attend an October 18 FRC briefing held at the PM's Secretariat helped the opposition's cause. The media is asking increasingly uncomfortable questions about the state's historic failures on disaster preparedness and tolerance of shoddy construction projects. Those in the affected-areas remain skeptical of GOP-assistance, largely a factor of their current desperation and beyond the GOP's control. We believe that as the situation stabilizes and reconstruction begins, the GOP retains the opportunity to rebuild its image with these parts of the population. End Comment.
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